

The Lotus Eater

By

W. Somerset Maugham

Most people, the vast majority in fact, lead the lives that circumstances have thrust upon them, and though some repine, looking upon themselves as round pegs in square holes, and think that if things had been different they might have made a much better showing, the greater part accept their lot, if not with serenity, at all events with resignation. They are like train-cars travelling forever on the selfsame rails. They go backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, inevitably, till they can go no longer and then are sold as scrap-iron. It is not often that you find a man who has boldly taken the course of his life into his own hands. When you do, it is worth while having a good look at him.

That was why I was curious to meet Thomas Wilson. It was an interesting and a bold thing he had done. Of course the end was not yet and until the experiment was concluded it was impossible to call it successful. But from what I had heard it seemed he must be an odd sort of fellow and I thought I should like to know him. I had been told he was reserved, but I had a notion that with patience and tact I could persuade him to confide in me. I wanted to hear the facts from his own lips. People exaggerate, they love to romanticize, and I was quite prepared to discover that his story was not nearly so singular as I had been led to believe.

And this impression was confirmed when at last I made his acquaintance. It was on the Piazza in Capri, where I was spending the month of August at a friend's villa, and a little before sunset, when most of the inhabitants, native and foreign, gather together to chat with their friends in the cool of the evening. There is a terrace that overlooks the Bay of Naples, and when the sun sinks slowly into the sea the island of Ischia is silhouetted against a blaze of splendour. It is one of the most lovely sights in the world. I was standing there with my friend and host watching it, when suddenly he said:

“Look, there's Wilson.”

“Where?”

“The man sitting on the parapet, with his back to us. He's got a blue shirt on.”

I saw an undistinguished back and a small head of grey hair, short and rather thin.

“I wish he'd turn round,” I said.

“He will presently.”

“Ask him to come and have a drink with us at Norgano’s.”

“All right.”

The instant of overwhelming beauty had passed and the sun, like the top of an orange, was dipping into a wine-red sea. We turned round and leaning our backs against the parapet looked at the people who were sauntering to and fro. They were all talking their heads off and the cheerful noise was exhilarating. Then the church bell, rather cracked, but with a fine resonant note, began to ring. The Piazza at Capri, with its clock tower over the footpath that leads up from the harbour, with the church up a flight of steps, is a perfect setting for an opera by Donizetti, and you felt that the voluble crowd might at any moment break out into a rattling chorus. It was charming and unreal.

I was so intent on the scene that I had not noticed Wilson get off the parapet and come towards us. As he passed us my friend stopped him.

“Hullo, Wilson, I haven’t seen you bathing the last few days.”

“I’ve been bathing on the other side for a change.”

My friend then introduced me. Wilson shook hands with me politely, but with indifference; a great many strangers come to Capri for a few days, or a few weeks; and I had no doubt he was constantly meeting people who came and went; and then my friend asked him to come along and have a drink with us.

“I was just going back to supper,” he said.

“Can’t it wait?” I asked.

“I suppose it can,” he smiled.

Though his teeth were not very good his smile was attractive. It was gentle and kindly. He was dressed in a blue cotton shirt and a pair of grey trousers, much creased and none too clean, of a thin canvas, and on his feet he wore a pair of very old espadrilles. The get-up was picturesque, and very suitable to the place and the weather, but it did not at all go with his face. It was a lined, long face, deeply sunburned, thin-lipped, with small grey eyes rather

close together and light, neat features. The grey hair was carefully brushed. It was not a plain face, indeed in his youth Wilson might have been good-looking, but a prim one. He wore the blue shirt, open at the neck, and the grey canvas trousers, not as though they belonged to him, but as though, shipwrecked in his pyjamas, he had been fitted out with odd garments by compassionate strangers. Notwithstanding this careless attire he looked like the manager of a branch office in an insurance company, who should by rights be wearing a black coat with pepper-and-salt trousers, a white collar, and an unobjectionable tie. I could very well see myself going to him to claim the insurance money when I had lost a watch, and being rather disconcerted while I answered the questions he put to me by his obvious impression, for all his politeness, that people who made such claims were either fools or knaves.

Moving off, we strolled across the Piazza and down the street till we came to Morgano's. We sat in the garden. Around us people were talking in Russian, German, Italian, and English. We ordered drinks. Donna Lucia, the host's wife, waddled up and in her low, sweet voice passed the time of day with us. Though middle-aged now and portly, she had still traces of the wonderful beauty that thirty years before had driven artists to paint so many bad portraits other. Her eyes, large and liquid, were the eyes of Hera and her smile was affectionate and gracious. We three gossiped for a while, for there is always a scandal of one sort or another in Capri to make a topic of conversation, but nothing was said of particular interest and in a little while Wilson got up and left us. Soon afterwards we strolled up to my friend's villa to dine. On the way he asked me what I had thought of Wilson.

"Nothing," I said. "I don't believe there's a word of truth in your story."

"Why not?"

"He isn't the sort of man to do that sort of thing."

"How does anyone know what anyone is capable of?"

"I should put him down as an absolutely normal man of business who's retired on a comfortable income from ill-edged securities, I think your story's just the ordinary Capri tittle- little."

"Have it your own way," said my friend.

We were in the habit of bathing at a beach called the Baths of Tiberius. We took a fly down the road to a certain point and then wandered through lemon groves and vineyards, noisy with cicadas and heavy with the hot smell of the sun, till we came to the top of the cliff down which a steep winding path led to the sea. A day or two later, just before we got down my friend said:

“Oh, there’s Wilson back again.”

We scrunched over the beach, the only drawback to the bathing-place being that it was shingle and not sand, and as we came along Wilson saw us and waved. He was standing up, a pipe in his mouth, and he wore nothing but a pair of trunks. His body was dark brown, thin but not emaciated, and, considering his wrinkled face and grey hair, youthful. Hot from our walk, we undressed quickly and plunged at once into the water. Six feet from the shore it was thirty feet deep, but so clear that you could see the bottom. It was warm, yet invigorating.

When I got out Wilson was lying on his belly, with a towel under him reading a book. I lit a cigarette and went and sat down beside him.

“Had a nice swim?” he asked.

He put his pipe inside his book to mark the place and closing it put it down on the pebbles beside him. He was evidently willing to talk.

“Lovely,” I said. “It’s the best bathing in the world.”

“Of course people think those were the Baths of Tiberius.” He waved his hand towards a shapeless mass of masonry that stood half in the water and half out. “But that’s all rot. It was just one of his villas, you know.”

I did. But it is just as well to let people tell you things when they want to. It disposes them kindly towards you if you suffer them to impart information. Wilson gave a chuckle.

“Funny old fellow, Tiberius. Pity they’re saying now there’s not a word of truth in all those stories about him.”

He began to tell me all about Tiberius. Well, I had read my Suetonius too and I had read histories of the Early Roman Empire, so there was nothing very new to me in what he said. But I observed that he was not ill read. I remarked on it.

“Oh, well, when I settled down here I was naturally interested, and I have plenty of time for reading. When you live in a place like this, with all its associations, it seems to make history so actual. You might almost be living in historical times yourself.”

I should remark here that this was in 1913. The world was an easy, comfortable place and no one could have imagined that anything might happen seriously to disturb the serenity of existence.

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“Fifteen years.” He gave the blue and placid sea a glance, and a strangely tender smile hovered on his thin lips.”I fell in love with the place at first sight. You’ve heard, I dare say, of the mythical German who came here on the Naples boat just for lunch and a look at the Blue Grotto and stayed forty years; well, I can’t say I exactly did that, but it’s come to the same thing in the end. Only it won’t be forty years in my case. Twenty-five. Still, that’s better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick.”

I waited for him to go on. For what he had just said looked indeed as though there might be something after all in the singular story I had heard. But at that moment my friend came dripping out of the water very proud of himself because he had swum a mile, and the conversation turned to other things.

After that I met Wilson several times, either in the Piazza or on the beach. He was amiable and polite. He was always pleased to have a talk and I found out that he not only knew every inch of the island but also the adjacent mainland. He had read a great deal on all sorts of subjects, but his speciality was the history of Rome and on this he was very well informed. He seemed to have little imagination and to be of no more than average intelligence. He laughed a good deal, but with restraint, and his sense of humour was tickled by simple jokes. A commonplace man. I did not forget the odd remark he had made during the first short dial we had had by ourselves, but he never so much as approached the topic again. One day on our return from the beach, dismissing the cab at the Piazza, my friend and I told the driver to be ready to take us up to Anacapri at five. We were going to climb Monte Solaro, dine at a tavern we favoured, and walk down in the moonlight, for it was full moon and the views by night were lovely. Wilson was standing by while we gave the cabman instructions, for we had given him a lift to save him the hot dusty walk, and more from politeness than for any other reason I asked him if he would care to join us.

“It’s my party,” I said.

“I’ll come with pleasure,” he answered.

But when the time came to set out my friend was not feeling well, he thought he had slaved too long in the water, and would not face the long and tiring walk. So I went alone with Wilson. We climbed the mountain, admired the spacious view, and got back to the inn as night was falling, hot, hungry, and thirsty. We had ordered our dinner beforehand. The food was good, for Antonio was an excellent cook, and the wine came from his own vineyard. It was so light that you felt you could drink it like water and we finished the first bottle with our macaroni. By the

time we had finished the second we felt that there was nothing much wrong with life. We sat in a little garden under a great vine laden with grapes. The air was exquisitely soft. The night was still and we were alone. The maid brought us bel paese cheese and a plate of figs. I ordered coffee and strega, which is the best liqueur they make in Italy. Wilson would not have a cigar, but lit his pipe.

“We’ve got plenty of time before we need start,” he said, “the moon won’t be over the hill for another hour.”

“Moon or no moon,” I said briskly, “of course we’ve got plenty of time. That’s one of the delights of Capri, that there’s never any hurry.”

“Leisure,” he said. “If people only knew! It’s the most priceless thing a man can have and they’re such fools they don’t even know it’s something to aim at. Work? They work for work’s sake. They haven’t got the brains to realize that the only object of work is to obtain leisure.”

Wine has the effect on some people of making them indulge in general reflections. These remarks were true, but no one could have claimed that they were original. I did not say anything, but struck a match to light my cigar.

“It was full moon the first time I came to Capri,” he went on reflectively. “It might be the same moon as tonight.”

“It was, you know,” I smiled.

He grinned. The only light in the garden was what came from an oil lamp that hung over our heads. It had been scanty to eat by, but it was good now for confidences.

“I didn’t mean that. I mean, it might be yesterday. Fifteen years it is, and when I look back it seems like a month. I’d never been to Italy before. I came for my summer holiday. I went to Naples by boat from Marseilles and I had a look round, Pompeii, you know, and Paestum” and one or two places like that; then I came here for a week. I liked the look of the place right away, from the sea, I mean, as I watched it come closer and closer; and then when we got into the little boats from the steamer and landed at the quay, with all that crowd of jabbering people who wanted to take your luggage, and the hotel touts, and the tumbledown houses on the Marina and the walk up to the hotel, and dining on the terrace – well, it just got me. That’s the truth. I didn’t know if I was standing on my head or my heels. I’d never drunk Capri wine before, but I’d heard of it; I think I must have got a bit tight. I sat on that terrace after they’d all gone to bed and watched the moon over the sea, and there was Vesuvius with a great red plume of smoke rising up from it. Of course I know now that wine I drank was ink, Capri wine my eye, but I thought it all right then. But it wasn’t the wine that made me drunk, it was the shape of the island and those jabbering people, the moon and the sea and the oleander in the hotel garden. I’d never seen an oleander before.”

It was a long speech and it had made him thirsty. He took up his glass, but it was empty. I asked him if he would have another strega.

“It’s sickly stuff. Let’s have a bottle of wine. That’s sound, that is, pure juice of the grape and can’t hurt anyone.”

I ordered more wine, and when it came filled the glasses. He took a long drink and after a sigh of pleasure went on.

“Next day I found my way to the bathing-place we go to. Not bad bathing, I thought. Then I wandered about the island. As luck would have it, there was a festa up at the Punta di Timtberio and I ran straight into the middle of it. An image of the Virgin and priests, acolytes swinging censers, and a whole crowd of jolly, laughing, excited people, a lot of them all dressed up. I ran across an Englishman there and asked him what it was all about. ‘Oh, it’s the feast of the Assumption,’ he said, ‘at least that’s what the Catholic Church says it is, but that’s just their hanky-panky. It’s the festival of Venus. Pagan, you know. Aphrodite rising from the sea and all that. ‘ It gave me quite a funny feeling to hear him. It seemed to take one a long way back, if you know what I mean. After that I went down one night to have a look at the Faraglioni by moonlight. If the fates had wanted me to go on being a bank manager they oughtn’t to have let me take that walk.”

“You were a bank manager, were you?” I asked.

I had been wrong about him, but not far wrong.

“Yes. I was manager of the Crawford Street branch of the York and City. It was convenient for me because I lived up Hendon way. I could get from door to door in thirty-seven minutes.”

He puffed at his pipe and relit it.

“That was my last night, that was. I’d got to be back at the bank on Monday morning. When I looked at those two great rocks sticking out of the water, with the moon above them, and all the little lights of the fishermen in their boats catching cuttlefish, all so peaceful and beautiful, I said to myself, well, after all, why should I go back? It wasn’t as if I had anyone dependent on me. My wife had died of bronchial pneumonia four years before and the kid went to live with her grandmother my wife’s mother. She was an old fool, she didn’t look after the kid properly and she got blood-poisoning, they amputated her leg, but they couldn’t save her and she died, poor little thing.”

“How terrible,” I said.

“Yes, I was cut up at the time, though of course not so much as if the kid had been living with me, but I dare say it was a mercy. Not much chance for a girl with only one leg. I was sorry about my wife too. We got on very well together. Though I don’t know if it would have continued. She was the sort of woman who was always bothering about what other people’d think. She didn’t like travelling. Eastbourne was her idea of a holiday. D’you know, I’d never crossed the Channel till after her death.”

“But I suppose you’ve got other relations, haven’t you?”

“None. I was an only child. My father had a brother, but he went to Australia before I was born. I don’t think anyone could easily be more alone in the world than I am. There wasn’t any reason I could see why I shouldn’t do exactly what I wanted. I was thirty-four at that time.”

He had told me he had been on the island for fifteen years. That would make him forty-nine. Just about the age I should have given him.

“I’d been working since I was seventeen. All I had to look forward to was doing the same old thing day after day till I retired on my pension. I said to myself, is it worth it? What’s wrong with chucking it all up and spending the rest of my life down here? It was the most beautiful place I’d ever seen. But I’d had a business training, I was cautious by nature. ‘No,’ I said, ‘I won’t be carried away like this, I’ll go tomorrow like I said I would and think it over. Perhaps when I get back to London I’ll think quite differently. ‘ Damned fool, wasn’t I? I lost a whole year that way.’”

“You didn’t change your mind, then?”

“You bet I didn’t. All the time I was working I kept thinking of the bathing here and the vineyards and the walks over the hills and the moon and the sea, and the Piazza in the evening when everyone walks about for a bit of a chat after the day’s work is over. There was only one thing that bothered me: I wasn’t sure if I was justified in not working like everybody else did. Then I read a sort of history book, by a man called Marion Crawford it was, and there was a story about Sybaris and Crotona. There were two cities; and in Sybaris they just enjoyed life and had a good time, and in Crotona they were hardy and industrious and all that. And one day the men of Crotona came over and wiped Sybaris out, and then after a while a lot of other fellows came over from somewhere else and wiped Crotona out. Nothing remains of Sybaris, not a stone, and all that’s left of Crotona is just one column. That settled the matter for me.”

“Oh?”

“It came to the same in the end, didn’t it? And when you look back now, who were the mugs?”

I did not reply and he went on.

“The money was rather a bother. The bank didn’t pension one off till after thirty years’ service, but if you retired before that they gave you a gratuity”. With that and what I’d got for the sale of my house and the little I’d managed to save, I just hadn’t enough to buy an annuity to last the rest of my life. It would have been silly to sacrifice everything so as to lead a pleasant life and not have a sufficient income to make it pleasant. I wanted to have a little place of my own, a servant to look after me, enough to buy tobacco, decent food, books now and then, and something over for emergencies.

I knew pretty well how much I needed. I found I had just enough to buy an annuity for twenty-five years.”

“You were thirty-five at the time?”

“Yes. It would carry me on till I was sixty. After all, no one can be certain of living longer than that, a lot of men die in their fifties, and by the time a man’s sixty he’s had the best of life.”

“On the other hand no one can be sure of dying at sixty,” I said.

“Well, I don’t know. It depends on himself, doesn’t it?”

“In your place I should have stayed on at the bank till I was entitled to my pension.”

“I should have been forty-seven then. I shouldn’t have been too old to enjoy my life here, I’m older than that now and I enjoy it as much as I ever did, but I should have been too old to experience the particular pleasure of a young man. You know, you can have just as good a time at fifty as you can at thirty, but it’s not the same sort of good time. I wanted to live the perfect life while I still had the energy and the spirit to make the most of it. Twenty-five years seemed a long time to me, and twenty-five years of happiness seemed worth paying something pretty substantial for. I’d made up my mind to wait a year and I waited a year. Then I sent in my resignation and as soon as they paid me my gratuity I bought the annuity and came on here.”

“An annuity for twenty-five years?”

“That’s right.”

“Have you never regretted?”

“Never. I’ve had my money’s worth already. And I’ve got ten years more. Don’t you think after twenty-five years of perfect happiness one ought to be satisfied to call it a day?”

“Perhaps.”

He did not say in so many words what he would do then, but his intention was clear. It was pretty much the story my friend had told me, but it sounded different when I heard it from his own lips. I stole a glance at him. There was nothing about him that was not ordinary. No one, looking at that neat, prim face, could have thought him capable of an unconventional action. I did not blame him. It was his own life that he had arranged in this strange manner, and I did not see why he should not do what he liked with it. Still, I could not prevent the little shiver that ran down my spine.

“Getting chilly?” he smiled. “We might as well start walking down. The moon’ll be up by now.”

Before we parted Wilson asked me if I would like to go and see his house one day; and two or three days later, finding out where he lived, I strolled up to see him. It was a peasant’s cottage, well away from the town, in a vineyard, with a view of the sea. By the side of the door grew a great oleander in full flower. There were only two small rooms, a tiny kitchen, and a lean-to in which firewood could be kept. The bedroom was furnished like a monk’s cell, but the sitting-room, smelling agreeably of tobacco, was comfortable enough, with two large armchairs that he had brought from England, a large roll-top desk, a collage piano, and crowded bookshelves. On the walls were framed engravings of pictures by G. F. Walls and Lord Leighlon. Wilson told me that the house belonged to the owner of the vineyard who lived in another collage higher up the hill, and his wife came in every day to do the rooms and the cooking. He had found the place on his first visit to Capri, and taking it on his return for good had been there ever since. Seeing the piano and music open on it, I asked him if he would play.

“I’m no good, you know, but I’ve always been fond of music and I get a lot of fun out of strumming.”

He sat down at the piano and played one of the movements from a Beethoven sonata. He did not play very well. I looked at his music, Schumann and Schubert, Beethoven, Bach, and Chopin. On the table on which he had his meals was a greasy pack of cards. I asked him if he played patience.

“A lot.”

From what I saw of him then and from what I heard from either people I made for myself what I think must have been a fairly accurate picture of the life he had led for the last Fifteen years. It was certainly a very harmless one. He bathed; he walked a great deal, and he seemed never to lose his sense of the beauty of the island which he knew so intimately; he played the piano and he played patience; he read. When he was asked to a party he went and, though a trifle dull, was agreeable. He was not affronted if he was neglected. He liked people, but with an aloofness that prevented intimacy. He lived thriftily, but with sufficient comfort. He never owed a penny. I imagine he had never been a man whom sex had greatly troubled, and if in his younger days he had had now and then a passing affair with a visitor to the island whose head was turned by the atmosphere, his emotion, while it lasted, remained, I am pretty sure, well under his control. I think he was determined that nothing should interfere with his independence of spirit. His only passion was for the beauty of nature, and he sought felicity in the simple and natural things that life offers to everyone. You may say that it was a grossly selfish existence. It was. He was of no use to anybody, but on the other hand he did nobody any harm. His only object was his own happiness, and it looked as though he had attained it. Very few people know where to look for happiness; fewer still find it. I don't know whether he was a fool or a wise man. He was certainly a man who knew his own mind. The odd thing about him to me was that he was so immensely commonplace. I should never have given him a second thought but for what I knew, that on a certain day, ten years from then, unless a chance illness cut the thread before, he must deliberately take leave of the world he loved so well. I wondered whether it was the thought of this, never quite absent from his mind, that gave him the peculiar zest with which he enjoyed every moment of the day.

I should do him an injustice if I omitted to slate that he was not at all in the habit of talking about himself. I think the friend I was staying with was the only person in whom he had confided. I believe he only told me the story because he suspected I already knew it, and on the evening on which he told it me he had drunk a good deal of wine.

My visit drew to a close and I left the island. The year after, war broke out. A number of things happened to me, so that the course of my life was greatly altered, and it was thirteen years before I went to Capri again. My friend had been back sometime, but he was no longer so well off, and had moved into a house that had no room for me; so I was putting up at the hotel. He came to meet me at the boat and we dined together. During dinner I asked him where exactly his house was.

“You know it,” he answered. “It's the little place Wilson had. I've built on a room and made it quite nice.”

With so many other things to occupy my mind I had not given Wilson a thought for years; but now, with a little shock, I remembered. The ten years he had before him when I made his acquaintance must have elapsed long ago.

“Did he commit suicide as he said he would?”

“It’s rather a grim story.”

Wilson’s plan was all right. There was only one flaw in it and this, I suppose, he could not have foreseen. It had never occurred to him that after twenty-five years of complete happiness, in this quiet backwater, with nothing in the world to disturb his serenity, his character would gradually lose its strength. The will needs obstacles in order to exercise its power; when it is never thwarted, when no effort is needed to achieve one’s desires, because one has placed one’s desires only in the things that can be obtained by stretching out one’s hand, the will grows impotent. If you walk on a level all the time the muscles you need to climb a mountain will atrophy. These observations are trite, but there they are. When Wilson’s annuity expired he had no longer the resolution to make the end which was the price he had agreed to pay for that long period of happy tranquility. I do not think, as far as I could gather, both from what my friend told me and afterwards from others, that he wanted courage. It was just that he couldn’t make up his mind. He put it off from day to day.

He had lived on the island for so long and had always settled his accounts so punctually that it was easy for him to get credit; never having borrowed money before, he found a number of people who were willing to lend him small sums when now he asked for them. He had paid his rent regularly for so many years that his landlord, whose wife Assunta still acted as his servant, was content to let things slide for several months. Everyone believed him when he said that a relative had died and that he was temporarily embarrassed because owing to legal formalities he could not for some time get the money that was due to him. He managed to hang on after this fashion for something over a year. Then he could get no more credit from the local tradesmen, and there was no one to lend him any more money. His landlord gave him notice to leave the house unless he paid up the arrears of rent before a certain date.

The day before this he went into his tiny bedroom, closed the door and the window, drew the curtain, and lit a brazier of charcoal. Next morning when Assunta came to make his breakfast she found him insensible but still alive. The room was draughty, and though he had done this and that to keep out the fresh air he had not done it very thoroughly. It almost looked as though at the last moment, and desperate though his situation was, he had suffered from a certain infirmity of purpose. Wilson was taken to the hospital, and though very ill for some time he at last recovered. But as a result either of the charcoal poisoning or of the shock he was no longer in complete possession of his faculties. He was not insane, at all events not insane enough to be put in an asylum, but he was quite obviously no longer in his right mind.

“I went to see him,” said my friend. “I tried to get him to talk, but he kept looking at me in a funny sort of way, as though he couldn’t quite make out where he’d seen me before. He looked rather awful lying there in bed, with a week’s growth of grey beard on his chin; but except for that funny look in his eyes he seemed quite normal.”

“What funny look in his eyes?”

“I don’t know exactly how to describe it. Puzzled. It’s an absurd comparison, but suppose you threw a stone up into the air and it didn’t come down but just stayed there...”

“It would be rather bewildering,” I smiled.

“Well, that’s the sort of look he had.”

It was difficult to know what to do with him. He had no money and no means of getting any. His effects were sold, but for too little to pay what he owed. He was English, and the Italian authorities did not wish to make themselves responsible for him. The British Consul in Naples had no funds to deal with the case. He could of course be sent back to England, but no one seemed to know what could be done with him when he got there. Then Assunta, the servant, said that he had been a good master and a good tenant, and as long as he had the money had paid his way; he could sleep in the woodshed in the cottage in which she and her husband lived, and he could share their meals. This was suggested to him. It was difficult to know whether he understood or not. When Assunta came to take him from the hospital he went with her without remark. He seemed to have no longer a will of his own. She had been keeping him now for two years.

“It’s not very comfortable, you know,” said my friend. “They’ve rigged him up a ramshackle bed and given him a couple of blankets, but there’s no window, and it’s icy cold in winter and like an oven in summer. And the food’s pretty rough. You know how these peasants eat: macaroni on Sundays and meat once in a blue moon.”

“What does he do with himself all the time?”

“He wanders about the hills. I’ve tried to see him two or three times, but it’s no good; when he sees you coming he runs like a hare. Assunta comes down to have a chat with me now and then and I give her a bit of money so that she can buy him tobacco, but God knows if he ever gets it.”

“Do they treat him all right?” I asked.

“I’m sure Assunta’s kind enough. She treats him like a child. I’m afraid her husband’s not very nice to him. He grudges the cost of his keep. I don’t believe he’s cruel or anything like that, but I think he’s a bit sharp with him. He makes him fetch water and clean the cow-shed and that sort of thing. “

“It sounds pretty rotten,” I said.

“He brought it on himself. After all, he’s only got what he deserved.”

“I think on the whole we all get what we deserve,” I said.”But that doesn’t prevent its being rather horrible.”

Two or three days later my friend and I were taking a walk. We were strolling along a narrow path through an olive grove.

“There’s Wilson,” said my friend suddenly.”Don’t look, you’ll only frighten him. Go straight on.”

I walked with my eyes on the path, but out of the corners of them I saw a man hiding behind an olive tree. He did not move as we approached, but I felt that he was watching us. As soon as we had passed I heard a scamper. Wilson, like a hunted animal, had made for safety. That was the last I ever saw of him.

He died last year. He had endured that life for six years. He was found one morning on the mountainside lying quite peacefully as though he had died in his sleep. From where he lay he had been able to see those two great rocks called the Faraglioni which stand out of the sea. It was full moon and he must have gone to see them by moonlight. Perhaps he died of the beauty of that sight.